

Early Literacy and Assessment for Learning (K–3) Series

Exploring Comprehension through Retelling: A Teacher’s Story



Pacific Resources for Education and Learning

Building Capacity Through Education

Written by the staff of the Pacific Communities with High-performance In Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD) project at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.

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Rita's Story

Rita is a Pacific island grade 2 teacher in a local village school. She has established a 90-minute daily literacy block in which she focuses on literacy-related activities. As she sits with her students during the literacy block, she realizes some of them are having difficulty comprehending text, and many are unable to retell the stories they've just read or listened to. Rita wants to help her students develop better retelling strategies. She knows practice will improve their ability to think critically and increase their level of comprehension, language development, and the awareness of story structure. Recently, she has been reading some professional journals focused on comprehension through retelling and is eager to try teaching retelling in new ways.

Rita recognizes how important it would be for her students to retell stories. She knows retelling information is necessary to help her students become better readers by teaching them how to construct meaning and infer from texts. However, before Rita can begin to think about planning her lessons, she needs to determine which students need help learning how to retell stories they have just read.

Rita decides to administer a read and retell assessment with a story she knows is appropriate for her 2nd grade readers. She notes the students' responses and records her observations of their behavior while they read the story. For example, Rita records whether students are able to make sense of the text while reading or if they are reading slowly word-by-word with little expression, indicating a loss of meaning. Once she has this information, she feels better able to plan effective lessons to meet the needs of each student in her class.

Throughout this booklet you will learn more about Rita's story and her experiences creating opportunities that enhance comprehension through narrative retelling. Narrative text tells a story and is the type usually found in short stories and novels. Rita strives to increase her range of skills and

put into practice the necessary strategies to help her students increase their levels of comprehension. While reading, you may identify with many of Rita’s experiences. However, you will want to craft activities and learning experiences unique to your practice and the individual needs of your students.

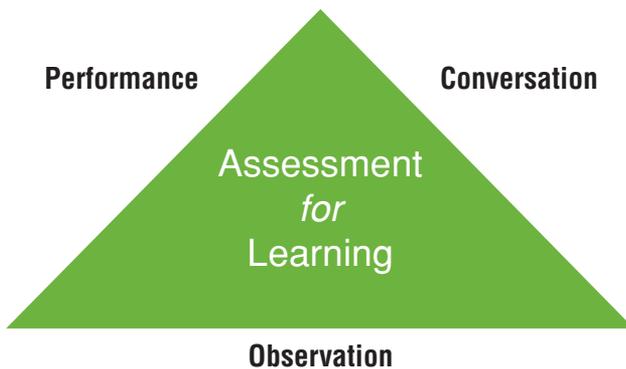
Retelling

Rita acknowledges that the purpose of reading is to derive meaning from the print on the page. She is learning that in order for her students to retell a story, she needs to help them learn how to organize their thoughts and integrate personal prior knowledge into the retelling. Rita realizes that while asking her students literal questions—stating exactly what is in the text—at the end of the text has value, questions that seek yes or no responses often limit students to recalling only fragments of information. As a consequence, Rita does not always get a full picture of her students’ ability to comprehend a whole story. Additionally, Rita knows that with retelling practice, her students will improve their understanding of narratives and their structures. With her guidance and support, they will learn about specific criteria used in narrative retelling, including orientation, setting, plot, events, and characters. When students can read or listen and retell independently, they reveal their level of comprehension by disclosing story details, placing events in sequential order, organizing their thoughts, and making inferences.

Assessing Comprehension through Retelling

Rita learns about her students’ ability to retell in different ways. She observes and then talks with them as they engage in specific retelling activities using the three pillars of assessment (see Figure 1). This helps Rita better understand each child’s retelling strengths and needs.

Figure 1. Three Pillars of Assessment



Performance

Rita creates various activities so the children can demonstrate their ability to retell. She may read a story and ask them to retell it, or she may ask them to read and retell the story to her. She asks the children two or three comprehension questions before they begin retelling. While the students are retelling, Rita notes their use of vocabulary, ability to make inferences, and use of the story's structure to guide their retelling. Rita records how each child organizes the information from the story and whether it matches the text. She uses this information to plan group and individual work specific to the needs of her students.

Observation

Rita listens carefully as the students retell the story. She watches how they use the pictures in the story to guide their retelling. She records what she has observed and uses that information when planning the next day's lesson. She tries to focus on each student at least once every 2 weeks.

Conversation

Rita schedules individual meetings with her students at least once every 2 weeks to talk about what she observed and to hear their perception of their own experiences with retelling. Rita discusses with her students what they can do to retell the story more comprehensively.

Assessing Performance: Giving the Read and Retell Assessment

One specific performance activity Rita uses for narrative retelling is an assessment that can be found in the pocket inside the back cover of this booklet, called “Telling Tales.” *Little Honu’s Journey* is the accompanying narrative. This story is based on a common narrative structure found in English stories. It has three main parts: an orientation, a complication, and a resolution. While this is not the only structure found in stories, it is commonly found in school stories. Before trying this activity, read the instructions carefully and practice with another teacher or older child. Be sure to make one copy of the recording form per student assessed.



Interpreting and Reflecting on Retelling Information

After assessing, Rita reviews the recording forms and writes down her thoughts. She identifies the following levels of retelling problems:

- Areas most students find difficult (e.g. identifying story structure or making inferences)—Rita plans a whole class mini-lesson to

help the students develop strategies for improving in these areas.

- Areas a small number of students find difficult (e.g., including the complication or problem in the retell)—Rita puts these students in a group to learn to identify the complication in a story and include it in a retell.
- Areas individual students find difficult—For these students, Rita plans specific activities to meet each student’s needs.

Rita will observe the students regularly and reassess them in a week or two, noting the changes in their ability to retell. She will regroup them based on the new assessment information. For Rita, this cycle is ongoing. She bases her planning on the changing needs of the students in her classroom.

Planning for Retelling in the Classroom: Resources

Once Rita has reflected on the information from the individual retelling assessments, she begins to think about how to plan instructional activities to help her students develop strategies to learn how to retell. Rita knows that she will need to do a lot of demonstrating for her students. She reads to them every day in preparation. A common strategy among teachers is to ask their students factual (literal) questions at the end of the story. However, Rita wants to find additional ways to focus on retelling during regularly scheduled literacy activities.

Rita creates a classroom library of children’s books. This collection is an assortment of books ranging in difficulty from picture to chapter books that Rita can read to her students. In addition, there are books at a level appropriate for the students to read by themselves. It is Rita’s plan to create opportunities for her students to be read to, as well as times when they will read independently. She knows it takes a great deal of time and practice to become a good reader—one who comprehends and can retell what was read.

Teaching for Retelling in the Classroom: Activities and Strategies

Once Rita establishes the students' interests and ability levels in working with retelling, she varies the activities. The following are a few of the activities and strategies used by Rita:

- Rita reads aloud in the classroom to her students on a daily basis. She knows that if her students are immersed in stories, they will be better prepared to hear story structure and learn new vocabulary. She talks with them about the books she reads and asks questions before, during, and after she reads the story. Every story she reads increases her students' abilities to use prior knowledge and construct meaning from text. Lastly, Rita enjoys reading and retelling stories to and with her students and they look forward to participating in this activity.
- Rita observes her students over a few days, exploring retelling as part of the literacy block. She focuses on the story she reads to them at the beginning of the literacy block. She then models for her students one way to organize a retell by using a story sequence map as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Story Sequence Map

What happened first?	What happened next?	What happened last?
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- Rita provides time to talk to her students about setting, plot, and characters. As she reads some stories, she demonstrates and creates charts along with the students as they identify specific story elements. Rita spends a lot of time exploring each element spanning days and sometimes weeks. She knows she cannot rush through these elements or do them all at once, so she carefully

plans which element to focus on for each lesson. Figure 3 contains some of the questions Rita uses to help her students understand different story elements.

Figure 3. Questions about Story Elements

Setting	Plot	Characters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When and where does the story take place? • What clues or pictures in the story helped you know what the setting is? • If the setting were different, how would the story be different? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened at the beginning of the story? • What was the problem in the story? • What did the characters do to try to solve the problem? • How did the problem get solved? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about the characters in this story? • What did their actions tell you about them? • How do they change or grow during the story?

- Rita learns that *prediction* is an important strategy for comprehension; it contributes to good retelling. She is careful to ask prediction questions before and during her read aloud time. At the beginning of the school year she has her students predict what a story is about based on the title. She knows that her students will have to rely on prior knowledge to make good predictions. Rita also knows that predicting by the title will help to make her students become more conscious about finding clues that give them information. Additionally, she recognizes that students may not know how to make appropriate predictions at first, but over time and with lots of demonstration and practice, they will improve. Rita has also learned the importance of having her students confirm or reject the predictions they made as the story is read. This helps build her students' critical thinking skills.

Rita knows that she must carefully listen to her students' predictions. She wants them to take risks and so she affirms by saying, "That's an interesting prediction," and follows up with "What

It is important to help students learn to make **appropriate** predictions.

*An appropriate prediction is one that makes logical sense based on given information. [It is a teacher's responsibility not only to] “**affirm**” (help) the students' responses, but also to “**craft**” their thinking.*

(Benson & Cummins, 2000, p. 40)

makes you say that?” or “Can you tell me more?” or “How does this prediction connect to the title?” This kind of prompting honors the students' thinking while allowing Rita to probe for more information before correcting a response. Rita has found it useful to record all the students' predictions on a chart. This way, while reading the story she can help students refine their predictions if necessary.

Rita soon moves on to having her students predict what the story is about based on the cover of the book. There is more information to be gained here and the purpose of this activity is to help students learn to make decisions *while* they are reading. They begin to connect the clues from the title to the clues from the illustrations on the cover of the book. While reading, she continues to refer back to her students' predictions to validate and confirm. Rita is confident that by practicing these prediction strategies she is helping her students learn what good readers do naturally so they can practice as they read independently. She is certain that these skills will help her students retell stories.

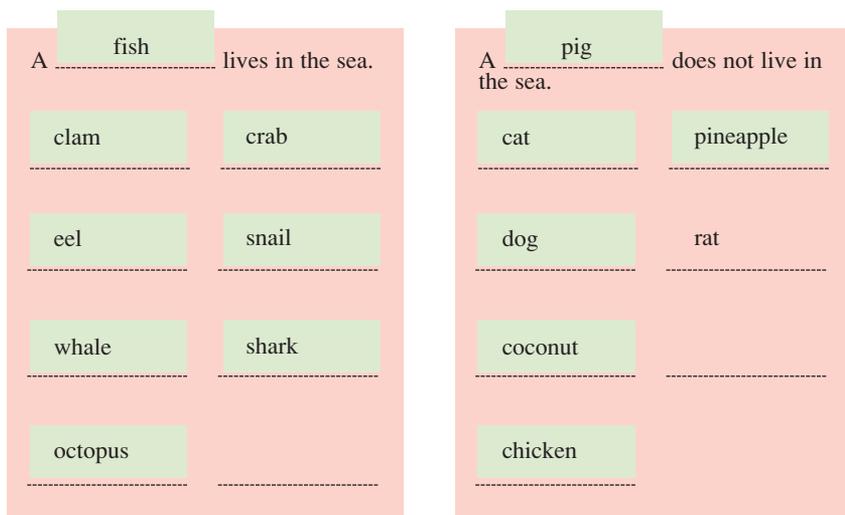
Rita invites her students to predict a story's vocabulary before she reads it to them. After reading the title and showing the cover, she asks them to list words they think might be in the story. Her students are actively engaged as she lists their vocabulary predictions. Rita also provides them with opportunities to predict the meaning of one or two unfamiliar words that are in the story.

For example:

Rita will read aloud a book entitled *Under the Sea*. She asks her students beforehand which words they might hear as she reads. She and the students make a list, which includes *clams*, *crabs*, *whales*, *fish*, *octopus*, and *coconut*. Again, this is an opportunity for Rita to help her students by *affirming* and *crafting*. Rita probes a bit further to discover that the student who predicted coconut has seen coconut trees growing near the sea and concludes that the word might appear in the text. Without probing, Rita might have thought this response was incorrect; however, she finds there is logic to the student's thought process. At the same time she helps the child to focus on the title, which is *Under the Sea*. She also asks her students to predict the meaning of an unfamiliar word: *cowry*.

- Rita understands that she needs to continually help her students develop their language and vocabulary knowledge. This is an important aspect of being able to retell stories. One way she achieves this is by having many conversations with her students. However, she realizes this may not be enough. She provides language-extending activities because she knows that ultimately this will aid her students in building topic knowledge and will be an extra enhancement when retelling stories. For example: after reading *Under the Sea*, Rita returns to the list of predicted words. To further develop the students' vocabulary and extend language opportunities, she creates pocket charts with removable vocabulary word cards to use during literacy center time (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Sample Pocket Charts



- Rita talks with her colleague, Hannah, a grade 1 teacher, and they brainstorm to create additional activities to further elaborate on language structures and concepts. Hannah has also been curious about expanding her repertoire of comprehension and retelling strategies.
- Rita creates lists of meaningful language structures she knows will help her students develop concepts and ideas to which they will be able to attach language. She charts them with her students (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Lists of Meaningful Language Structures

**What kinds of fish live
in the sea?**

blue fish	scary fish
big fish	tasty fish
hungry fish	tiny fish
baby fish	white fish
funny fish	happy fish

What do fish do?

Fish swim.
Fish eat.
Fish make more fish.
Fish hide.
Fish make bubbles.
Fish lay eggs.

In the sea I can...

ride on a boat,
swim with the fish,
jump over the waves,
dive under water,
float on my back, and
catch a fish.

- Rita sets aside times when her students can choose the story and take turns retelling it to their classmates.
- Rita finds a short checklist in one of her resources that will help her students check on themselves as retellers (see Figure 6). She knows this will be useful as her students progress but first she must teach them how to use the checklist independently.

Figure 6. Checklist for Retelling

My Checklist for Retelling		
Orientation	Yes	No
1. I started the story with an introduction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I named the main characters.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I included when the story happened.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I told where the story took place.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Events		
5. I told the events in order.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Complication		
6. I included the problem in the story.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Resolution		
7. I told how the problem got solved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I told how the story ended.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Note. Adapted from *Literacy Development in the Early Years: Helping Children Read and Write* (p. 215), by L. M. Morrow, 1997, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Copyright 1997 by L. M. Morrow. Adapted with permission.

As Rita focuses on comprehension and retelling in general, she becomes more aware of the importance of providing opportunities for her students to be read to by a skillful, fluent reader like herself and for them to read on their own. Rita realizes that the most meaningful learning experiences for students are those that arise from the work they are engaged in instead of isolated skills and drills. She recognizes that the amount of time her students spend on reading text is crucial to their success.

Rita is pleased to see the classroom environment she’s established for the students become a stimulating one where students and teacher can engage in authentic literacy learning.

Throughout this booklet you have been learning about retelling assessment and strategies. For younger students (kindergarten and grade 1), it may be necessary to administer a listen and retell assessment, in which you read a story to the children and ask them to retell it to you afterward. For older students, a written retell may be in order. It is always important to determine the purpose for a retell, but equally important is to know your learners and identify what is developmentally appropriate for the grade level you teach.

Lessons Learned

Rita has shared a number of important lessons pertaining to retelling.

- Teachers need to have a variety of resources and instructional strategies to address the comprehension and retelling needs of the students in their classrooms.
- Teachers will want to create opportunities to assess their students' knowledge about how to retell stories.
- Teachers should gather information about their students' retelling and comprehension strengths and needs.
- Teachers need to think not only about information gained, but how this information helps in the planning for the instructional needs of individual students.
- Teachers need to help students develop the strategies to learn how to retell as an important part of becoming a good reader who comprehends text.
- Teaching for retelling often requires teachers to be flexible in their planning by providing multiple strategies and demonstrations and trying out new activities.
- The most meaningful and powerful learning experiences for students are those that arise from the work accomplished (e.g., actual lessons, activities, or context), rather than from isolated skills and drills.

Like Rita, you may want to try out strategies that are new to you. Be inquisitive and experimental. Take a risk, and work in new and innovative ways. Do not limit yourself to a single example. Talk with your colleagues and brainstorm ideas. You, too, may have many great ideas and strategies that are not reflected in Rita's story.

References

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Suggested Readings

- Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read. Kindergarten through grade 3*. Washington, DC: The Partnership for Reading.
- Pinnell, G. S., & Fountas, I. (1994). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



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